

Hauling Ashore the Black Sea-bass.

THE HAUNTS OF THE BLACK SEA-BASS.

By Charles Frederick Holder.

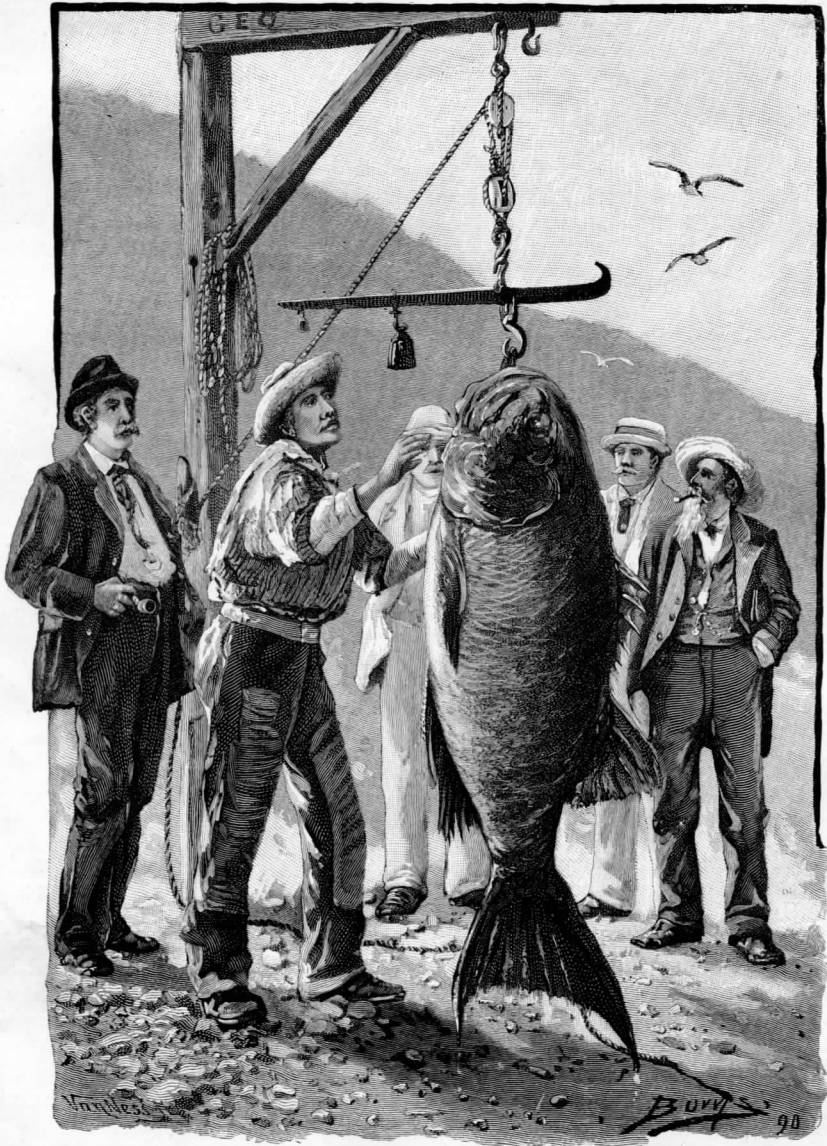
It is said that when the purchase of the Northwest coast was contemplated by the United States Government, an old English *raconteur* and fly-fisherman remarked, "Oh, let the Yankees have it; the salmon won't rise to a fly."

Southern California might go by default in this way, as fly-fishing, compared with that of the East, is not to be had, though the San Gabriel, Aroyo Leco, and other cañons have many pools where gleams of light and color flash, telling of the living rainbow lurking in the shadows. If southern California is deficient in black-bass streams and salmon pools, it possesses the finest marine fishing in North American waters; not only in the size and gamy qualities of the fish, but in the variety of forms which follow each other as the seasons advance, adding new and constant zest to the sport.

The striped-bass fishing has its prototype here in the gamy yellow-tail,

seriola dorsalis, which attains a weight of forty or fifty pounds, and is as rapid in its movements as the tarpon. An important personage is he who lands a yellow-tail on an ordinary striped-bass rod, reel, and line. Equally gamy as the yellow tail is the sea-bass, ranging up to sixty pounds, while the barracuda, tuna, albacore, and others afford the sport esteemed by blue fishermen in the East.

From the Santa Barbara Islands to the Coronados, and beyond, is the field of the southern California Walton; the islands of the Santa Barbara channel, Santa Catalina and San Clemente being particularly famous in the piscatorial annals and the Mecca of lovers of this sport—winter and summer. The island of Santa Catalina is the principal rallying-point, being the largest, possessing the small town of Avalon, a popular summer resort, with numerous bays and harbors protected from the in-shore



"Three hundred and forty-two and a half, sir."

wind that blows in beneath the steady trade. An ideal spot it is—a series of mountain ranges, from one thousand to twenty-six hundred feet, rising green-hued from the blue waters of the Pacific and extending twenty-two miles down the coast, and an equal distance from it. From the slopes of the Sierra Madre, forty miles away, the island appears formed of two lofty peaks, sloping gently

to the sea; but standing upon its highest summit I looked down upon range after range, cutting the island into a maze of cañons that wound in every direction to the sea. Near its northern portions two harbors extend in from opposite sides; the island evidently at one time having been separated, the isthmus, as it is called, being but a few hundred feet across; from this it widens

out to six miles or more. The island seems in reality a gigantic mountain projecting from the ocean. The cliffs are majestic, beetling, rising sheer from the sea, broken into strange forms, and tinted with folds and splashes of color. The only beaches are at the mouths of the cañons, or perhaps where the continued falling of rocks in land-slides caused by the winds have formed a vantage-ground for waves. On the west coast the sea assails the cliffs with sullen roar, and the in-shore wind whirls up the cañons, beating the fog against the rocks and bearing it aloft, where it is dissipated by the radiating heat of the mountains. On the east the water is calmer and often like glass, affording favorable conditions for boating and fishing.

The air of this island in the sea seems redolent with romance. Three hundred years ago Cabrillo, a Spanish adventurer, cast anchor in one of its harbors and named it La Victoria, after one of his vessels. In 1602 Viscaino visited and gave it the present name of Santa Catalina. Father Ascencio, who accompanied him, describes the inhabitants as sun worshippers, one of whose temples he found near the two harbors. In these early days the island had a large and prosperous native population; every well-watered cañon had its village, and I have found evidences of them on some of the highest ranges.

One of my first visits to Santa Catalina was for the purpose of opening some of the ancient graves of these people, and while thinking the matter over with "Mexican Joe," who has lived thirty years on the island, I took out an old bass-rod that had seen service on the St. Lawrence, and began looking it over.

"What you catch with that?" asked my companion, with a curious look on his strong Indian face.

"Bass, black," I answered, nonchalantly, whirling the reel and listening to the music.

"What!" retorted Joe, laughing; then, "how much he weigh?"

"Five pounds," thinking of a certain afternoon on the river.

"Oh!" continued Joe, "I thought you mean black sea-bass."

"Well, how much does he weigh?" I asked.

"How much he weigh? You want catch with that?" said Joe, pointing to the rod with scorn. "Why, man, he weigh five hundred pounds. Yes, black sea-bass run from seventy-five to five hundred, seven hundred pounds."

I ran over in my mind the various heavy-weight tackles—the tarpon, striped-bass, salmon rods, and came to the conclusion that a flag-staff with a donkey-engine reel attachment might do; yet decided, then and there, to take a black sea-bass, if it was among the possibilities. I announced my determination interrogatively to my guide and oarsman.

"Of course you catch one if you know how. I show you where he live. It take patience, if you have it," was the reply.

I was well supplied with this necessary, and a few days later found myself gliding away in the deep shadows of the rocks, headed for one of the haunts of the deep-sea bass. The water here was so clear, objects forty feet below could be distinctly seen, glances into the depths showing an almost tropical condition of things. Bright-hued fishes, yellow and orange, darted by, while patches of wiry sea-weed gleamed with blue and iridescent tints. In the watery space fairy-like *medusæ* moved lazily about, rising and falling, while here, there, and everywhere flashed a veritable gem in red, gold, blue, green, and amber, the minute crustacean saphirina.

When off a point which juts boldly into the sea, the keeper of the fortunes of the black sea-bass ceased rowing, cast anchor, and we swung in the current that ran along the rocky shores to the north. The tackle produced by my oarsman was not æsthetic. The line was almost as large as that employed in the halibut fisheries of the East, while the hook was perhaps twice as large as a tarpon-hook, arranged with a well-working swivel. Live bait, a white fish which we soon caught, was attached, with a sinker sufficient to carry it down. The line was then dropped over, and that patient waiting, which makes all successful fishermen philosophers, begun.

Three hundred—yes, one hundred years ago, a boat could not have dropped anchor here without being the object

of hundreds of eyes, and the news would have been flashed from hill-top to cañon to the various camps; now the only observers were the shag that flew along near the boat, its long, snake-like neck extended, startling the flying-fish into the air in fright, and a wondering pair of eyes that stared at us, telling of a sea-lion making the grand rounds; while the leaping forms near shore were seals, bound for their rookery around the bend. The whistle of the plumed quail came softly over the crags from the neighboring cañon, and the gentle musical ripple of the waves lulled us to fancied repose.

I had been watching the interesting face of my Mexican guide, wondering at his life, when I noticed his eyes suddenly grow large; then he lifted the line gently with thumb and forefinger. It trembled, thrilled like the string of a musical instrument touched by some player beneath the sea. Slowly it took his fingers down to the water's edge.

A bass? Yes. No snap, no sudden rush, no determined break for liberty as I had seen the black bass make. I was disappointed; a simple drag. But the Mexican smiled and passed me the line, arranging with the other hand the coil in the bottom of the boat.

"He's a young one," he remarked. "Pay him out ten feet, then jerk an' stan' clear the line."

These instructions took but a few seconds, yet the line was now gliding through my hands like a living thing—four, eight, ten feet. Suddenly it tautened, and for a single second the tension hurled the sparkling drops high in air; then, leaning forward, I jerked the line with all my strength. I have watched the silvery form of the tarpon as, like a gleam of light, it rushed into the air, shaking, quivering before the fall, and have handled large fish of many kinds, but I was unprepared for the deep-water tactics of this king of the bass. For a brief period there was no response, as if the fish had been stricken with surprise at this new sensation; then a smoke, a succession of snake-like forms rising into the air—nothing but the line leaping from its coil. "Ah, he only a young one," said Joe; "take hold."

In some way I had lost the line in

this rush. Watching my opportunity, I seized it again, and by an effort that thoroughly tested the muscles, brought the fierce rush to an end. Then came heavy blows distinctly given, as from the shoulder, evidently produced as the fish threw its head back in quick succession.

"Take it in!" said my companion, excitedly, and bending to the work I brought the line in, fighting for every inch that came; when the Mexican shouted a warning. Whizz! and the coils leaped again into the air. Nothing could withstand the rush—a header directly for the bottom and away.

The anchor had been hauled up by the Mexican at the first strike, and now, with line in hand, we were off, the boat churning through the water, hurling the spray over us, and bearing waves of gleaming foam ahead.

"Take in!" cries Joe, who stands by the coil, and again, slowly fighting against the dull blows, the line comes in. Ten feet gained, and, whizz-eee! as many more are lost. In it comes once more, hand over hand, the holder of the line bending this way and that, trying to preserve a balance and that tension which would prevent a sudden break. Now the fish darts to one side, tearing the water into foam, leaving a sheet of silvery bubbles, and swinging the boat around as on a pivot. Now it is at the surface—a fleeting vision followed by a rush that carries the very gunwale under water. This, followed by a sudden slacking of the line, sends despair to the heart: he is gone, the line floats. No, whizz! and away again, down. All the tricks of the sturdy black bass this giant of the tribe indulges in, except the mid-air leaps which gladden the heart of the angler. Quick turns, downward rushes, powerful blows, mighty runs this gamy creature makes, fighting inch by inch, leaving an impression upon the mind of the fisherman that is not soon forgotten.

With a large rope, and by taking turns, the fish could have been mastered, but such methods were not considered sportsman-like here. It must be taken free-handed, a fight at arm's-length, and being such, the moments fly by; it is half an hour, and we have not yet seen

the outline of our game. Gradually the rushes grow less, the blows are lighter, and what is taken is all gain.

"It take your wind," said Joe, with a low laugh.

So it had, and I stood braced against the gunwale after a final dash—a burst of speed—to see a magnificent fish, black, lowering, with just a soupçon of white beneath, pass swiftly across the line of vision, whirling the boat around end for end.

"You've got him," from astern, is encouraging; yet I have my doubts; an honest opinion would have brought the confession that I was in the toils. But the flurry was the last. Several sweeps around the boat, and the black sea-bass lay alongside, covering boat and men with flying spray with strokes of its powerful tail.

"It is a small one," ejaculates my man, wiping the spray from his face. Imagine a small-mouthed black bass enlarged, filled out in every direction until it was six feet long, and plump in proportion; tint it in rich dark lines, almost black, with a lighter spot between the pectoral fins; give it a pair of eyes as large as an ox, powerful fins and tail, a massive head, ponderous, toothless jaws, and you have the black sea-bass, or Jew fish—the best fighter, the largest bony deep-sea fish in Pacific waters. Too large to be taken into the boat, it had to be towed in, and finally, after being stunned with an axe after the quieting method applied to muskallonge in the St. Lawrence, we got underway, the huge body floating uncomfortably behind, materially retarding the progress.

The entry to Avalon harbor was one of triumph, as at that time the capture of a bass was a new thing to visitors; and as the magnificent creature was hauled up on the sands by willing hands, the entire population gathered about to listen to the details of the sport. Then came the weighing. "Three hundred and forty-two and a half, sir," said a Mexican youth who had triced the fish up; "better than the average." Glory enough for one day.

During this summer, at Catalina, about twenty of these fish were caught, ranging from eighty pounds to three hundred and fifty. All were females, ready to spawn, and had come in to Pebble Beach for this purpose, depositing their eggs in August and September. This locality has always been a famous place for them, and ten thousand pounds were taken there in a single day four years ago. At that time there was a systematic fishery, the meat being dried and—tell it not in Gath!—sold as boneless cod. My oarsman informed me that the bass had been frightened off. These fishermen killed the fish on the spot, throwing the heads overboard, and so the bass left, only comparatively few having been seen since.

This is a native version. The fish undoubtedly migrate, going into deeper water during the winter, or possibly to the south.

It is often said that there is little pleasure in taking deep-sea fish; but to capture the black sea-bass, free-handed, play it fairly, and bring it to the gaff, is an experience that well compares in sport and excitement with hand-line tarpon fishing on the Gulf coast.

